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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000221

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI-IRAQI RELATIONS: RIYADH BACK IN THE GAME?

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Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission, Sandra M. Muench, for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a surprising move, King Abdullah welcomed former Iraqi PM and current Iraqiyya coalition leader Dr. Iyyad Allawi to his desert encampment near Riyadh on February 20. The meeting, prominently featured in the state media, suggests a change in Saudi thinking about Iraq, and an apparent show of support for Allawi and his secular Shia/Sunni coalition. A self-proclaimed "advisor" to Iraqi VP Tariq Al-Hashimi told post that Prince Muqrin has directed Saudi-controlled Al-Arabiyya television to provide favorable media coverage to Iraqiyya candidates, and that Hashimi would also visit the Kingdom soon. The decision to act now--prior to the elections--suggests the USG message that Saudi disengagement was pushing Iraq further into Iran's arms may finally be getting through. END SUMMARY.

BACK IN THE GAME

2. (U) On February 20, Dr. Iyyad Allawi, former Iraqi PM and current leader of the cross-sectarian Iraqiyya coalition, met with King Abdullah at his desert encampment at Rowdat Khuraim outside Riyadh. Saudi attendees at the meeting included GIP Head Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz; Royal Advisor (and son of the King) Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah; and Abdulmohsen bin Abdulaziz Al-Tuwaijri, Assistant Deputy Commander of the Saudi National Guard. The meeting received front-page coverage in several major dailies, and was featured prominently on Saudi television and the official Saudi Press Agency website.

SUPPORT FOR ALLAWI

3. (C) Commenting on Iraq in a conversation with a visiting U.S. delegation two days after the Allawi meeting, Al-Tuwaijri voiced his support for Allawi. "Allawi is the only person who can unite the Iraqi people," he said. The U.S. should support Allawi, he continued, and marginalize Maliki's influence on the government. Repeating a familiar refrain, Al-Tuwaijri said Maliki "cannot be trusted...he is just like Chalabi, and everyone knows that Chalabi is an Iranian agent."

4. (C) In a later meeting with Deputy FM for Multilateral Affairs Dr. Prince Turki, P/M Couns asked whether the King's meeting with Allawi signaled a Saudi willingness to re-engage with Iraqi political groups to minimize Iranian influence in the region. After a lengthy tirade about Nouri Al-Maliki's

perfidies, Prince Torki essentially confirmed this was the case. The King agreed to meet with Allawi because he was "the sort of person we want to work with in Iraq." Allawi was reaching out across different groups, "and it didn't matter if they were Shia, Sunni, or Kurds -- they were all Iraqis."

IRAQI EMBASSY "UNAWARE"

15. (C) Iraqi Second Secretary Ahmad Al-Jarba told Poloff on February 22 that their Embassy in Riyadh had been "unaware" of Allawi's visit, and that they had played no official role. It was part of a "Gulf tour" by Allawi, he continued, that was meant to signal to Iraqi voters that Allawi was "acceptable" to regional leaders. Asked whether this indicated any impending changes in the Saudi-Iraqi relationship, Al-Jarba replied, "perhaps, if Allawi wins, things might be better." However, some underlying issues would remain the same regardless of Iraq's leadership, and Al-Jarba expected the Saudis would feel compelled to show more forward motion on Iraq following the elections irrespective of the election outcome--especially given their growing concern about the Iranian threat.

U.S. ADVOCACY MADE A DIFFERENCE

16. (C) In a meeting with Polcouns February 22, Mark Al-Salih, an American businessman purporting to represent Iraqi VP Hashimi, said he had spoken with Prince Muqrin following the Allawi meeting and that Muqrin had assured him the Saudis would begin to signal their support for the

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Iraqiyya coalition. A directive had already been passed to the Saudi-controlled Al-Arabiyya to begin providing positive media coverage of Iraqiyya, he continued, and an invite would be extended to VP Hashimi to visit in the near future. Asked what sparked this apparent turn-around, Salih gave some credit to the USG. The Saudis watched VP Hashimi's visit to the U.S. very carefully, he posited, and were pleased to see how warmly he was received. In particular, the fact that he met with both President Obama and VP Biden made an impression. Salih claimed that he had helped broker a tete-a-tete meeting between Hashimi and Saudi Ambassador Adel Al-Jubeir during the D.C. trip which went very well; this may also have convinced the Saudis to get more involved. Salih welcomed the steps the Saudis had taken and added that it would be useful if the Saudis and the U.S. could convince Salih Al-Mutlaq to continue supporting Iraqiyya even if he himself was not standing in the elections.

COMMENT: SAUDIS BACK IN THE GAME?

17. (C) After months of waiting on the sidelines, the Saudis' warm welcome of Dr. Allawi was a surprising signal that they were ready to get back in the game. In his February 15 meeting with Secretary Clinton, King Abdullah proclaimed that any future Saudi involvement in Iraq would be "public and transparent." While transparent is a stretch, this Saudi move was indeed very public. Whether the Saudis actually favor Allawi may be debatable, but his inclusive brand of politics and apparent willingness to flout Tehran certainly play well here. Allawi's visit provided an occasion for the Saudis to underscore their support for an "Arab" Iraq. For months, we and our many high-level visitors have been stressing to the Saudis that their lack of involvement in Iraq was the surest way to guarantee the outcome they feared most--an Iraq firmly locked into an Iranian orbit. While the King's stubborn distrust of Maliki remains, our repeated appeals, combined with growing worries about Iran, may

finally be getting through to his pragmatic side. END
COMMENT.

SMITH